

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

November 15, 2020

Prelude

Gathering

Call to Worship

Liturgist: Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

All: **Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.** *Psalm 90: 1-2*

All Singing: 348 “Great is Thy Faithfulness”

God’s Greeting

Passing the Peace

Reconciliation

Liturgist: You turn people back to dust, saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”

All: **A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.**

Liturgist: Yet we are like grass that springs up new in the morning but by evening it is dry and withered. Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures, yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away.

All: **So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.** *Psalm 90: 3-12, adapted*

Silent confession and lament

All Singing: 480 “Wait for the Lord”

Liturgist: Now you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. But you, brothers and sisters, are not to be surprised.

All: **For we are children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night.**

Liturgist: Since we belong to the day, let us be awake sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

All: **For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.**

Liturgist: Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up. *1 Thess 5: 1-11, adapted*

All Singing: "Day of the Lord"

W. Kimbrough

**It's not long till the boastful are silenced and shamed.
It's not long till the wealth of the wicked's reclaimed.
And the ones who have waited with eyes on the Lord
will shine like the sun forevermore. It's not long till the Day of the Lord.**

**Just be still and be faithful and dwell in the land.
Put your trust in the Savior and cling to his hand.
When your heart burns with anger for all that is wrong,
do not let the dark steal your song. It's not long till the Day of the Lord.**

**It's not long till the Day of the Lord, It's not long till the Day of the Lord!
Everything that is broken will soon be restored. It's not long till the Day of
the Lord.**

**Do not fear for the wicked with weapons of war,
for the Lord is the shelter and strength of the poor.
And our God comes with laughter; let him be your joy.
The power of the sword, he'll destroy. It's not long till the Day of the Lord.**

Proclamation

**All: Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life!
Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today.
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.** *Based on John 6: 68*

Scripture: Matthew 25: 14-30

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should

have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

“So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Scarcity or Abundance

All Singing: 689 “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

Dedication

Prayers of the People

All Singing: 358 “Give Thanks”

Benediction

Worship Leaders

Pianist / Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Violinist / Vocalist: Bethany Keeley-Jonker
Cellist: Adeline Larsen
Liturgist: Eileen Meier
Prayer: Chris Gabrielse
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

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Text: Matthew 25: 14-30
Title: Scarcity or Abundance
Date: 11.15.20
Roger Allen Nelson

In the 1970s LaSalle Street Church (in Chicago) was part of a coalition that built a mixed income housing complex. Some Hope Church folks, like Bud Ipema, were part of this project and elder Arlo Compaan had an office there. Situated in the shadow of Cabrini Green it was a remarkable venture.

Investing both money and sweat equity LaSalle Street Church retained a 2% investment in the property and when it was sold in 2014, they received a \$1.6 million windfall. That's a lot of money for a church of about 200 members.

Given their long history of investment in neighborhood ministries there were all sorts of ideas about how to put the money to good use. However....

The elders voted to take \$160,000 off the top and one Sunday they surprised everyone in the congregation with a check for \$500 – encouraging them to use the money, in whatever way they chose, for God's work in the world.

That morning, pastor Laura Truax said,

There is no fine print here. None of you need to do anything but walk over to Leslie Hall and get the check. Is this unbelievably risky? Yes, it is. Right now, we're church that's \$50,000 behind its budget.... We're doing this because this is what it feels like to do business with God: risky and crazy and vulnerable and incredibly threatening and exciting at the same time.

That's pretty cool, isn't it?

A living parable....

They were good stewards. God blessed them and they in turn sought to invest again to bless others. Maybe that's the point of our text. Invest wisely and watch the blessings multiply. God gives according to ability and helps those who help themselves.

So, don't be timid, tepid, or terrified,
don't be cautious, clingy, or shy,
don't bury your blessing,
but invest your treasure in the kingdom and abundance will follow
for the Master wants you to share in his joy.
Bury your treasure and life will hold its own sort of hell.

This parable of the kingdom is often read with that slant. The lesson is about faithful stewardship of the gifts God has given until God returns to take account. But as a terrible investment manager, this reads like a parable of judgement. What if I slip up, miss an opportunity, can't muster the courage, or get sidetracked and selfish? Is this the only way to understand Jesus here?

Our translation reads that the servants were given bags of gold. The Greek word here is actually, *talanta*. And, it is probably not entirely inappropriate, to equate *talanta* with the English word, “talent.” In fact, the etymology of “talent” can be traced back to its use in this text in the publishing of the King James Bible. So, it must mean more than money, and surely the lesson means that we’re to invest all our resources, our skills, abilities, gifts, and talents....

But, the word originally was a measure of weight or a measure of money. A *talanta* was the equivalent to the wages of a life time; it was an obscenely large amount money. As one scholar put it:

A Mediterranean laborer wouldn't have any more of a clue about how to invest five talanta than the guy who bags my groceries would have about investing \$74 million... Jesus (who had never personally seen that kind of money) used an outlandish hyperbole to symbolize the gospel.

Most readings of this parable turn on how to interpret *talanta*.

What do the talents suggest or symbolize?

But, dear friends, what if the parable turns on a different word?

Consider the poor bloke who hid the money because that seemed better than to risk losing it. He decided to bury it as they did during times of war. You might lose your tent and some cattle in a battle, but buried treasure was secure. So, he got a shovel, found a deserted place behind an old eucalyptus tree, and buried the talent. And for that he is forever ridiculed....

For while he didn't have the wisdom to invest with Berkshire Hathaway, or the courage to put money down on those funny-looking-new-fangled Macintosh computers, neither did he have the sense to stick it in a money market account bearing 1.2% interest.

The third servant wasn't a scoundrel or a slacker, he was just cautious. He couldn't risk prosperity for fear of failure. The first two take a risk and turn a profit; but he's tossed into darkness to gnash teeth because he wanted to be safe.

On that fateful day when he's questioned about what he did with the money, he responds that he knew his master was a hard man. The word here is *skleros* – think “sclerosis.” It's the same word used for having a “hardness of heart.” It is not a compliment. One scholar defines it as “a word with no positive associations. This is hard in the sense of ruthless, merciless, singularly unpleasant and mean.”

So, while the other two celebrate the joyful multiplication of abundance, the third one bites his lip and cowers in the corner because he's sure that one who gave him more money than he could imagine was a stickler for detail. One who balanced the scales, punished every misstep, kept track of every failing, and dammed every fault.

The third servant didn't dare invest the money because of the way in which he saw the giver. Maybe his "failure" wasn't the lack of return on investment but his assessment of the giver as stingy and hard.

Richard Rohr writes,

Your image of God creates you – or defeats you. There is an absolute connection between how you see God and how you see yourself and the whole universe.

So, dear friends, could it be that this parable is not so much about the money made as it is about the character of the giver? Could it be that this parable is not so much about what we do but about who God is?

Bald and bow-tied, church historian Martin Marty writes:

The plot of the 66 canonical books in the Bible, for all its zigs and zags, shows the generosity of God. The first line in Genesis is "In the beginning God created" the cosmos out of chaos—something God did not have to do but chose to do as a generous expression. The last line in Revelation is "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." Say "Amen" to that as a propeller of continuing generosity. Of course, one must take the zigs seriously, as they appear in Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and too many stories of God's judgment. But these do not counter the Bible's witness to the character of God as generous all along the way, generous with Israel and generous through Jesus Christ.

And that is to say that in the free-overwhelmingly-extravagant-radical-self-giving-generosity of God in Christ you have received a gift: You are loved and accepted, forgiven and free. It is a generosity that is beyond comprehension or imagination. In a world that measures people

by the size of their wallet or the shape of their body,
by what they've got or what they give,
by intellectual muscle or political capital,
by piety or production.

You are measured by a grace that can only be measured in hyperbole – something like more money than you can count. You are loved and accepted, forgiven and free. And that gift is rooted in the very character of the giver.

Look. These are dark difficult days. Our political norms are under stress, a pandemic is surging largely unabated around the world, and lock-downs and distance from loved ones is deadening. It feels like things are closing in. I don't mean to belittle that. We're in for a hard bitter season....

But! You've also been given a gift beyond anything you could ever ask or imagine – a gift too grand to be trifled with. And while none of it was earned or deserved, it's a gift for which you are now a steward.

You can bury it or you can share it.
You can clench it tight for fear of losing it or open it to others.
You can let it lie fallow or you can till it.
You can hoard it or invest it.
You can live in the joy of abundance or the fear of scarcity.

Dear friends, we can marvel at God's generosity or cling to the comfort that he's as hard-hearted and hard-headed as we are....

Underneath the darkness of these days there is still the light that the essential character of God is *hesed* - a generous love. Not a hard heart but a heart of lovingkindness and mercy.

Therefore, may we live out of that gift without greed or fear or despair.
May we live with hope and gratitude and a willingness to invest in the lives of others – because of the nature of the Giver.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.